

VU Research Portal

The Importance of Ideals in Education

de Ruyter, D.J.

published in

Journal of Philosophy of Education
2003

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1111/1467-9752.00339](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.00339)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

de Ruyter, D. J. (2003). The Importance of Ideals in Education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 37(3), 467-482. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.00339>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

The Importance of Ideals in Education

DORET J. DE RUYTER

The article argues that it is important to offer children ideals. Ideals are defined as imagined excellences, which are so desirable that people will try to actualise them. These characteristics show the importance of ideals for people: ideals give direction and meaning to their lives. The motivating power of ideals can, however, also lead to fanaticism. Education should therefore involve several worthy ideals that children can commit themselves to as well as critical reflection on the ways in which people are committed to and try to actualise them.

INTRODUCTION

‘We were told at school, at least I was told at school, to have ideals. This, it seems to me, is rot. Ideals are dreams. They come between us and reality—when what we need most is just precisely to see reality.’

In the view of James, one of the characters in Iris Murdoch’s novel *The Bell*, ideals disturb one’s sense of reality.¹ Ideals tempt a person to enter into a dream world instead of facing and dealing with reality. The idea that ‘unrealistic dreams’ or ‘fantastic visions’ should give way to realistic and attainable goals can degenerate, however, into a crude balance-sheet mentality. It is not that governments are short on expressions of commitment to educational ideals, encompassing such aspirational values as equality, a healthy and just democracy, and a productive economy as well as sustainable development. But these become overshadowed by the language of achievable goals, benchmarks or assessable standards.² In this article I shall argue that aspirational values or ideals are important and that they have a critical role in education.

When the term ‘ideal’ is used in reference, for instance, to a just democracy or the liberal educational ideal of autonomy, it is not always clear what the meaning of ‘ideal’ is, why this term is used, what the position of ideals in education is and why ideals should be important in education. In this article I shall not attempt to address all these questions but shall make a start with three: the meaning of ideals, their importance and their place in education.

IDEALS (IN EDUCATION)

There are two relatively uncontested characteristics of ideals. Ideals are images of excellences that are not yet realised and they are aims or goals we deeply desire to realise. After an examination of these characteristics I shall explore another characteristic of ideals that is related to these characteristics and is important in the context of ideals in education—namely, their personal character. I will end the section with a summary description of my perception of the relation between ideals and conceptions of the good.

My sources for the conceptual clarification that follows are academic, mainly philosophical, texts and my linguistic intuitions with regard to our common language use of the term ‘ideals’. I will use educational examples to illustrate the characteristics, which explains the admittedly inelegant title of this section.

Ideals are images of excellences that are not yet realised

The first characteristic of ideals is that they refer to things that people consider to be excellent, the optimum or the best. Harvey Siegel, for instance, states that ‘ideals are primarily those things which are held to be supremely valuable’ (Siegel, 1999, p. 393), while Richard Hare claims that ‘to have an ideal is to think of some kind of thing as pre-eminently good within some larger class’ (Hare, 1963, p. 159).

This formal description of ideals is neutral with regard to the content of ideals. A person can be said to have ideals, which she believes to be excellent, although others deem these values to be inappropriate, unattractive, obtuse or immoral. For example, the creed of the Ku Klux Klan states that it ‘is preparing for the coming disorder that will test the very survival of the White Race and White Christian ideals’ (www.texasknights.com). The ideals expressed in this creed are sacred and moral to the knights, but since they are detrimental to the non-white population non-members (racists excepted) will judge them immoral. Or, as a second example, when a friend tells me that her primary ideal is to break the record for cycling backwards while playing the violin for the *Guinness Book of Records*, I may wonder about her priorities in life, although *prima facie* I have no grounds for denying that this is her ideal. In contrast, if we are to argue for the importance of ideals in education such a formal description will not suffice; we need to provide a normative argument as to which ideals should or should not be offered to children. I shall return to this in the third section.

Excellence is a necessary condition of the term ‘ideal’. If a person uses the term ‘ideal’ with regard to something and at the same time heavily criticises it or does not show in any way that it is special to her, we would say that she has not understood the term ‘ideal’ (see also Rescher, 1987, p. 120). For instance, if a student undertakes a course in education, because she was not offered a place in medicine, which she really wanted, we would be confused if she said that studying education was her ideal.

We might wonder if she had understood the meaning of the word 'ideal' or might question her sincerity. This does not mean that a person cannot question her ideals. On the contrary, as we shall see at several points in this article, questioning one's ideals is an important aspect of discovering which ideals one truly underwrites, but questioning excellence does not mean that one necessarily denies it. Where excellence is denied, however, that which was held to be an ideal can no longer be so. For instance, Dora, another character in *The Bell*, discovers that 'She had been beckoned on by a vision of Dora the cultivated woman; but after a year of being Mrs Greenfield she was already finding her ideal too difficult and was even beginning to dislike it' (Murdoch, 1999, p. 8). It had ceased to be an ideal.

Excellence is not a sufficient condition of an ideal, however, because, it seems, when an excellence is realised it is no longer an ideal. Ideals share this quality with aims, for instance. The moment one has achieved one's aim, one no longer calls what has been achieved an aim. For instance, if my aim is to 'bag' all the Munros in Scotland—that is, to climb all hills over 3,000 feet—and I have done so, I cannot say that this continues to be my aim, because I have already accomplished this. Having fulfilled one's aim means that the aim is no longer an aim. It is an achievement or a reality. This is also true for ideals, though our linguistic intuitions seem to indicate that there is a distinction to be made between 'ideal' as a noun and 'ideal' as an adjective. If a piano teacher says that her ideal is to be a piano teacher one might respond by saying: 'But you are a piano teacher; it is no longer an ideal'. She could, however, say that she has the ideal job. Once an ideal is realised or attained by a person, the situation or character trait is no longer an ideal but real. This means that ideals can be realised, though as we shall see shortly, this does not apply to all ideals. There is, however, something elusive about ideals: they exist until the moment they are realised. Thus, ideals are imagined excellences; they are dreams or visions and therefore they can be the most superb imaginable.

This does not mean that ideals are irrational. We can qualify ideals in terms of the rationality of their basis and their sense of realism. If, for instance, it were an ideal for someone that human beings should be able to fly, say, because this would solve the problem of air pollution, we might agree with her concern for the environment, but would not take her ideal seriously. The fact that her ideal misses every relation to our physical make-up makes her ideal irrational. Having ideals the attainment of which we cannot even attempt does not involve a conceptual mistake—as where someone calls a non-excellent aspiration an ideal—but it does involve an empirical one. We will react accordingly: we will not deny that her ideal may be that human beings should fly, but we will try to convince her that she is pursuing windmills.³

Excellence further explored

We can make a distinction between two kinds of ideals, both of which are important in education: ideals that specify excellent situations and ideals that specify the characteristics of an ideal person (excellences of

character).⁴ Ideal situations are situations the person believes to be excellent and that she aspires to achieve. These can be further specified in terms of kinds of ideal situations—related, for example, to moral, religious, social, political, economical and aesthetical ideals.⁵ Additionally, a person can have these ideals for herself but also for other people. They can *inter alia* apply to the world as a whole, to a country, to a community, to a family and to the person herself. Such ideals might range from global aspirations towards the achievement of a nuclear-free world or a classless society to smaller-scale, more local desires such as winning a world title in a sports competition, or having a welcoming family, or remaining healthy throughout one's life. Ideal situations can encompass personality or character ideals. For instance, when someone says that her ideal is to become a good mother, she thereby not only describes a personal situational ideal (becoming a mother), but also implies the personality traits she thinks a good mother should have.

Aristotle's virtue theory is an obvious source for examples of ideal character.⁶ Virtues are excellences of character. According to Aristotle, being virtuous means that one acts to the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, for the right end and in the right way (Aristotle, 1985, p. 51). This description of the virtuous person points towards an ideal of continuous right action. Ideal qualities of character could include virtues such as courage, temperance, wisdom, justice, honesty and generosity.

In addition to the distinction between kinds of excellence, it is also possible to differentiate levels of excellence. This may seem a contradiction in terms, but given their status as images we could make a distinction between two ways of conceptualising a situation and two corresponding levels of excellence. According to Nicholas Rescher, we can have an image of excellence that we believe is 'something that is altogether and unqualifiedly perfect' and one of 'something that is "as perfect as we can realistically expect to find"' (Rescher, 1987, p. 116). There are two related differences between these conceptions of ideals. In the first place, the first conception, which could be called an ultimate ideal, is necessarily flawless or perfect, whereas this is not so for the second conception which could be called a normal ideal.⁷ A normal ideal takes into account the possible imperfections of an imagined excellence. For instance, a person can acknowledge that her ideal to become an astronaut relates to an activity that involves danger. The second distinction, which was anticipated above, is that while ultimate ideals are unattainable, (normal) ideals can be attained. Ultimate ideals, defined as flawless excellences, are unrealisable 'in this imperfect, sublunary dispensation' (Rescher, 1987, p. 115). This is not only an empirical conclusion, but also a conceptually necessary condition of 'ultimate ideals'. This is not the case for (normal) ideals, of which we can say that they can be achieved by hard work or even by chance. For instance, many people fill in a lottery form every week, hoping that having the numbers right one day will fulfil their ideal of being rich. In our common language, we tend to use both conceptions interchangeably and it is not always clear which we refer to. For instance, when a group of researchers in the Faculty of Education of

the University of Glasgow asked Initial Teacher Education students to complete an open-ended questionnaire about their ideals (in 2000 and in 2001), more than a third of them stated that their ideal was to get married (De Ruyter *et al.*, forthcoming). I think that if we had asked the students which conception of ideals they had in mind, they would have found it difficult to give an answer. They probably would have said that a flawless marriage is the more ideal but that they would also find it ideal if their marriage were as excellent as human characteristics allow.

The examples I have given illustrate the way that people can have, and probably do have, several ideals within the categories of both ideal situations and ideal character. This makes it important for a person to reflect on the compatibility or coherence of her ideals. For one can believe that a particular situation or quality of character is excellent, whereas in combination with other ideals it may not be. When ideals conflict one does not have to deny that one believes that both are excellent, but one has to acknowledge that our world is not so ideal that conflicting ideals can simultaneously be realised, and that therefore one has to choose which ideal one values more. This leads to a further characteristic of ideals: their motivating or conative power.

Motivating power

If a person believes that a situation or quality of character is excellent and it is not realised in her experience, we can presume that she has a desire to achieve or realise it. This desire is qualified in two related ways. First, as Alan Gewirth argues, aspirations are one's deepest desires: 'they express the most intimate yearnings of the self, and they reflect most directly the values and indeed the very definition of the self as an enduring conative entity' (Gewirth, 1998, p. 23). Second, as Harry Frankfurt shows, these desires are second order volitions (Frankfurt, 1982, p. 82): a person who has ideals wants these to influence her will.

The first qualification excludes the possibility that a person has an ideal she does not want to have or, in other words, has an image (of an ideal) that she does not want to become reality. When one believes that a situation is excellent, it would be inconsistent if one said that what one desires is undesirable, and thus that one's desire to achieve the ideal is undesirable. It would follow from this that it is impossible for a 'wanton' to have ideals (see Frankfurt, 1982, pp. 86–87). Thus, when a person has an ideal we assume, unless she uses the term mistakenly, that she wants to have this ideal and desires that it become real. This means that she wills that her actions lead or contribute to the achievement of the ideal. These qualifications shed a new light on the distinction made in the former section between ideal situations and ideal character. Qualities of character are not only implied when a person says she wants to become a good mother, artist or athlete, but the ideal situations the person aspires to also indicate what kind of a person she ideally would like to be.

Thus, to have an ideal and to be indifferent to its realisation is a contradiction in terms. This desire will normally lead to the desire to

contribute to its realisation, that is, to have the will to achieve the ideal and to act accordingly. Surely, there are people who dwell upon the past and idealise it, or who think that the realisation of their ideals is not in their hands. With regard to such romantic dreamers I would argue that ideals have become escapist tools (see Edel, 1945, p. 567). The example of the powerless is not a counter example to the conative power of ideals. On the contrary, powerless people experience feelings of loss or powerlessness precisely because of their wish to achieve the ideals.

If the will to achieve one's ideals is characteristic of having an ideal, we can also reflect on the way in which people try to achieve them, even though the particular character or type of action that people undertake is not a conceptual characteristic of ideals. I propose three criteria for the evaluation of a person's action to achieve her ideals—namely, rationality, morality and correspondence or authenticity (see also De Ruyter, 1993). First, actions can be called rational if they are a means to achieve the ideal.⁸ For example, if someone has the ideal of becoming rich and she steps into her car every time she sees a rainbow to find the pot of gold at the end of it, we shall regard her as irrational. Second, we can evaluate whether or not people's actions are moral. Immoral actions are not only related to immoral ideals; there is not a necessary relation between having good ideals and achieving them in a (morally) good way. On the contrary, history shows that when ideals are related to ideologies that are fanatically espoused, they can lead to immoral actions on the part of their followers. Holy wars, like the Crusades or the suppression and killing of millions in Communist Russia and China, are examples of immoral practices that were based upon and justified in terms of moral ideals. Roy Baumeister's expression 'idealistic evil' is the precise typification of immoral behaviour based on moral ideals (Baumeister, 1997, p. 169 f.). A third way in which we evaluate people's action is in judging whether or not it corresponds with their ideals. We question a person's ideals if she acts in a way that conflicts with her ideals or that does not contribute to achieving the ideal. For instance, when a person states that global justice is her ideal and that the inequality between the first and third world should be diminished, but nevertheless buys goods as cheaply as possible knowing that these were made in sweatshops or by underpaid workers, we can confront her with the gap between her ideal and her action. It is possible that she has particular reasons for buying these goods: she may, for example, not have money to buy more expensive clothes and her children need to be dressed. She may also have arguments explaining why her purchase of these goods does accord with her ideal. If neither of these considerations applies and she buys these goods only because she wants to shop as economically as possible, however, we will question whether or not she sincerely underwrites the ideal.

The personal nature of ideals

The superlative nature of ideals seems to make it more likely that (groups of) people will differ in their ideals than that they will share the same view

on what is excellent. For example, religious ideals are the most important in some people's lives, whereas they play no role in the lives of others. Similarly, some people have the ideal of becoming rich or having a large family, whereas others, though they can imagine these to be excellent situations, do not consider these to be ideals for themselves. Rescher claims that ideals 'lack the sort of universality we attribute to norms; there is something more particularized, more *parochial* about them' (Rescher, 1987, p. 122; see also Berlin, 2000). He states that 'ideals, like goals, are relative to the particular values to which an agent subscribes, and to the priorities he gives them; they are not inherent in his status as a rational agent *per se*' (p. 123). Siegel, on the other hand, argues that there are transculturally or universally applicable ideals. He builds his argument in reaction to the position of multiculturalists who claim that transcultural or universal ideals are impossible, that all ideals are particular to a culture. However, Siegel points out that multiculturalists adhere to 'the moral requirement to acknowledge and respect cultural differences' (Siegel, 1999, p. 392). In stating that 'all cultures must accept the legitimacy of all other cultures', the multiculturalist has expressed commitment to an ideal that applies to all cultures. This transcultural normative reach or implication has to be accepted by the multiculturalist. Otherwise her position will not be rational, because she will be contradicting herself. On the basis of her premises this is the only legitimate conclusion. Siegel concludes that 'While as a matter of fact cultures do not converge on a universally held set of ideals, it is nevertheless the case that some ideals are universal in the strong sense that they are applicable to all cultures, even to those cultures which do not recognize them as such' (pp. 407–408). Thus, though ideals such as respect for persons or human dignity are not actually to be found everywhere, they can be applied to all cultures on the basis of the consistency argument.⁹

I agree with the argument that someone with critical rational capacities cannot espouse a moral ideal like respect without regarding such an ideal as universally applicable or contradicting herself. I therefore think that it is important not only to offer children moral ideals, but also to assist them to develop the capacities to reflect rationally and normatively on these ideals. Hence, as Carr points out, 'no really rational being could understand fully what a quality like courage, temperance, justice or compassion is and yet fail to want to possess it' (Carr, 1991, p. 255).

But the personal character of ideals can also be interpreted in another way: the same situation or quality of character can be an ideal for one person, whereas another has already achieved it or can achieve it without great effort. This is so because people have different capabilities and live in different circumstances. Clearly, for some it is an ideal to have a daily meal, whereas for others this need is satisfied; for some it is an ideal to be able to read, walk or talk without difficulties, whereas for others these things can be taken for granted.

Finally, the exploration of the meaning of ideals has made clear what is perhaps obvious: that ideals are a sub-class of values. First, ideals are supreme values (Moore, 1948; Siegel, 1999); they are a person's answer to

the question of what her highest values are, of what she finds most excellent. Frankfurt's (1999) notion that ideals are things that we love or deeply care about expresses the same idea in a slightly more poetic way. For, similar to our ability to value many people but to love truly only a few, we can also love only a few ideals. Second, ideals are not-yet-realised values. When an ideal is realised, it is still a value but no longer an ideal, though we can say, as already indicated, that we live in an ideal situation in which a supreme value, such as harmony, is realised.

Following onto the idea of a subclass of values, we can say that ideals are part of one's conception of the good life, because ideals co-determine what one believes will make one's life good or flourishing (see next section). On the other hand, a conception of the good also determines which ideals a person (comes to) underwrite. For instance, having a hedonistic conception of the good life makes it more likely that one has materialistic ideals concerning wealth or property than if one has a Buddhist conception. We can thus perceive the influence between one's conception of the good life and one's ideals as an iterative process. People can change their ideals and their conception of the good because they encounter other ideals. So too, new ideals that one encounters can influence one's conception of the good. A person who is raised in a secular family may discover, for example, that she finds a new kind of richness in the ideals that Muslims have about women. This will change not only her conception of the good but also the ideals she underwrites.

In this section I have described ideals as imagined excellences that are so desirable that people will try to actualise them. In the next section I will address the question of why these are important for people.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDEALS

Rescher (1987) describes ideals as navigation aids. This image of ideals gives an indication of why it is important to have ideals: Ideals give direction to people's lives. One of the strongest claims for the importance of ideals is offered by Frankfurt, who claims that people's lives will *only* be meaningful if they are devoted to ultimate ends they deeply care about, that is, ideals (Frankfurt, 1999, p. 85; see also Singer, 1992, p. 92).¹⁰ What is deeply cared about can differ from person to person, and therefore ultimate ends are highly diverse, having in common only the characteristic force of attachment that they exert on people. This attachment gives direction and meaning to people's lives. Ultimate ends are valuable to people not only for intrinsic reasons but also instrumentally, because they provide the reasons for one's actions and, therefore, the meaning of one's actions and one's life. Additionally, they help to define meaningful options for a person: 'Unless a person makes choices within restrictions from which he cannot escape by merely choosing to do so, the notion of self-direction, of autonomy, cannot find a grip' (Frankfurt, 1999, p. 110). Ideals provide these limits. In virtue of these restricting aspects especially, Frankfurt concludes that ideals define the essential nature of persons. Without ideals people have no identity and there is nothing that they can

'be said essentially to be' (p. 115). Ideals are thereby existentially necessary for people.

We might, however, think of two objections against the claim that ideals have such an importance for people. First, it may be objected that ideals are not necessary at all for finding meaning in life, that someone who is only concerned primarily with satisfying her basic needs may nevertheless find such meaning. To the extent, however, that such a person places supreme value on a life of modesty—for its absence of egocentric demands, perhaps, and for its gratitude for simple things—this is tantamount to having ideals. That these ideals are different from those of people who constantly want to optimise their circumstances or from those of the perfectionist is not a counter-argument; it only means that what is excellent 'does not have an absolute supremacy or height' (Gewirth, 1998, p. 27). If such a person says that she is content with what she has and with who she is, and that she cannot be bothered with improving herself, even with respect to these modest values, we do have a counter-example to the necessity of ideals for finding meaning in life. Contrary to Frankfurt's claim that a life can be meaningful only in the light of ideals, therefore, I want to make the less strong claim that ideals are existentially important but not necessary. They are important because they give direction, inspiration and incentive to make something special of one's life or to lead a flourishing life. In Gewirth's terms, 'The person who has aspirations has something to live for that is especially significant for him, something that gives meaning, zest and focus to his life' (pp. 32, 47).

A second objection, which can still be used against my claim that ideals are important though not necessary, may rest on the greater chances of frustration rather than satisfaction in a life lived in pursuit of ideals. Surely, it might be said, an ideal can have an undermining effect on a person's sense of meaning in life and self-respect. This seems to be particularly true for ultimate ideals because they are by definition impossible to realise. A proper recognition of the unattainability of ultimate ideals, however, should save us from being disappointed. Normal ideals, in contrast, are more likely to undermine a person's sense of meaning or self-respect because these ideals are held to be excellent and to express things that are not impossible to realise. When ideals of this kind turn out to be unattainable for an individual, they may have this negative or detrimental effect. A man whose ideal it is to become a father and who finds out that he is infertile or a woman who has the ideal of climbing Mount Everest but has become paralysed may find that their lives have lost meaning.

A further cause for the loss of meaning is to be found where a person realises that her ideals are not really ideals to her at all. This is expressed vividly in J. S. Mill's autobiography, where he describes the crisis that he faced when he asked himself the question:

Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: 'would this be a great joy and

happiness to you?' And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, 'No!' At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for (Mill, 1969, p. 81).

I do not think, however, that the various possible negative feelings considered here are sufficient reason for arguing against the importance of ideals. What the examples do show is that, when the route to the attainment of one's ideal has become blocked, one either has to change direction or change one's original way of navigating. For similar reasons it is important that one has realistic ideas about one's capabilities and the possibilities of one's situation in life if (normal) ideals are to be reasonably entertained. I shall return to this point in the next section.

I believe that the existential importance of ideals as well as their stimulating force give sufficient reason to argue that ideals are important in education and, therefore, that parents and teachers should offer ideals to children.

IDEALS IN EDUCATION

Ideals figure in education in two ways, namely as educational ideals and as ideals in education. The first refers to the ideal aims and practices of education, and the second to ideals that educators offer to children. The German philosopher of education Wolfgang Brezinka describes educational aims as norms that encapsulate ideals for the children: 'They signify specific personality states that children can achieve or that they at least have to come within reach of achieving' (Brezinka, 1974, p. 12; my translation).¹¹ Given the characterisation of ideals as excellences, I want to argue that we should regard educational ideals as a sub-class of educational aims.

Following the characteristics of ideals I have discussed in the first section, I will explore several topics concerning ideals in education: the ideals themselves; the capacity and disposition to imagine and reflect upon ideals as well as ways of achieving the ideal; the need for a realistic interpretation of the possibility of achieving one's ideals.

Which ideals?

I will explore the question of which ideals educators should offer to children or which ideals their aims should be, distinguishing between moral, immoral and non-moral ideals. I will not discuss *which* ideals within these categories educators might pass on or *how* they might do so; I will do no more than give reasons as to why these categories are relevant in education.

It is obvious that educational aims should involve ideal moral qualities of character and that children should be offered moral ideals, irrespective

of any overall conception of the ideal person that might be offered, be this the autonomous person, the religiously devout adult or the financially successful person. This is, as Rescher says, because 'what matters is thus not just that one has ideals but that one has sensible or appropriate ideals. And this is a matter of having ideals that conduce toward a life that is not only satisfying for its bearer but also worthy of respect from his fellows' (Rescher, 1987, p. 126). It might be questioned why moral *ideals* are important or what their distinct role in moral education might be. My answer to both questions is that moral ideals can provide an inspiration to follow moral rules and adhere to norms because they illuminate the vision that lies behind the moral rules: they show the spirit of the rules and norms (see also Rescher, 1987, p. 121). In addition to conveying what one should or should not do, offering ideals means that educators provide children with moral exemplars—an excellent moral community or society—that could provide a positive inducement not only to follow the rules but to follow them as optimally as one can.

This is also to ask for a clear correspondence between the moral ideals that educators proclaim and their actions. If children are offered ideals and at the same time see the teachers who proclaim these ideals acting in opposition to them, they will either expose the teachers or question the importance of the particular ideal. The ideal of being honest, even when it is embarrassing, might act as a particularly challenging example. To be honest in such circumstances is an ideal because we will probably never fully realise it. If a teacher, on the one hand, wishes to pass on this ideal to children, asking that they to live up to it, but, on the other, never admits in front of the class or to particular pupils that she herself has made mistakes, the pupils will learn not to take this ideal very seriously.¹²

The claim that educators should not offer immoral ideals to children scarcely needs justification. Because our liberal democracy allows that people privately hold immoral ideals, for instance, racist or sexist ones, however, it is possible that children inherit these ideals from their parents. Moreover, if my analysis of ideals is correct and the conative power of ideals is accepted, offering immoral ideals to children implies inciting them to commit immoral actions. Such incitement should be illegal, in liberal democracies, because it is harmful for society as well as for the children concerned, and therefore the state should reflect on its position regarding the freedom of adults who are parents to pass on their immoral ideals.¹³

I cannot be as unequivocal with regard to non-moral ideals, such as being beautiful or being an excellent athlete or distinguished academic, because these ideals themselves are neither necessarily in the interest of others or the children themselves nor in principle detrimental to those interests. Therefore, which non-moral ideals the children aspire to can be based exclusively on the children's subjective desires or tastes.¹⁴ This does not mean that educators have to refrain from sharing non-moral ideals with children or that parents may not hope that children will come to have the same non-moral ideals that they hold. For instance, many parents who are successful in their career have the ideal that their child

should follow in their footsteps. However, even though the parents feel that they have realised their ideal, it does not follow that this ideal will be appropriate for their child, though of course it may be. Non-moral ideals, like moral ideals, can have the function of stimulating and inspiring children to try to achieve something beyond the more immediate possibilities that present themselves, to do something of significance in and with their lives, where this may not be superlative in absolute terms, as I have indicated several times, but where it does constitute an excellence for them.

The ability to imagine and reflect

The first characteristic of ideals I discussed in the first section of this article was that ideals are images of excellences. To have ideals means that one has to be able to imagine, to dream and to be creative. Imagination assists people in discovering if the ideals are genuine. As Abraham Edel puts this, an ideal 'if actually achieved, would meet the needs which it represents or on which it rests' (Edel, 1945, p. 564). In other words, imagination is conducive to the evaluation of one's ideals such that one discovers whether or not the ideals one seems to hold are those one truly desires (see also Hare, 1963, pp. 171–175). Mill's example dramatically illustrates what such an imaginative exercise can lead to. As Gewirth points out, 'The second-order desires of desire-autonomy that one has on the basis of reflective evaluation—what one desires to desire as a result of such evaluation—can be considered to be one's desires in a more stable and authentic sense than the desires one has and pursues without subjecting them to critical scrutiny' (Gewirth, 1998, p. 38). Additionally, imagination assists people in deliberating about the order of importance of their ideals where these conflict: a person can ask herself whether she would prefer to become a world-famous musician or a home-based mother of several children. Obviously, the conflict can arise also between the ideals an individual holds and those of others. Imagination can help people to assess whether or not their own ideals interfere with the ideals or interests of others.

Critical reflection is also important, because commitment to ideals is not unproblematic. People can be excessively committed to their ideals: they can be fanatical idealists. Jay Newman (1986) explores the ways in which excessive commitment can be identified in terms of three characteristics: the belief to which one is committed, the emotional attachment to the belief and finally the value given to the belief. We can use his analysis to describe three kinds of fanatical commitments to ideals. The first fanatic, the excessive believer, is a person who is obsessed with her ideal and cannot think of anything else. The second is the person who is too intensely emotionally tied to her ideals; she takes her ideal so seriously that she overreacts to others' objections or becomes blind to them. The third fanatic overvalues the importance of her ideal at the expense of other

ideals or the interests of others. Fanatics are often fanatical in all these ways.

An idealistic fanatic is morally suspect and potentially dangerous because her own ideals overrule and can negate the ideals and interest of others. We do not always (completely) object to fanatics: fanatics such as Gandhi or Martin Luther King are often presented as moral exemplars. However, even with these cases we can claim that it is often the case that being fanatic with regard to one ideal not only runs against the interests of others but also is in conflict with other ideals held by the exemplars themselves—for example, in the cases given here, any ideal of family life was obviously jeopardised by the fervour of their commitment. Thus, it is important that children learn to evaluate how people are committed or attached to their ideals, the consequences that different kinds of commitment have for others and thus also in what ways they themselves should be committed to their ideals. This will encompass the fostering of another commitment—namely, the commitment to the principle of respect for others and the moral requirement to take into account the interests of others.

Finally, children need to learn to evaluate critically actions undertaken to achieve ideals. At several points I have indicated that ideals inspire people to act but that this inspiration does not necessarily lead to good actions. Moral and non-moral ideals can inspire people to destructive action. This is not only true for the atrocious actions of terrorists who take hostage or kill other people for moral or non-moral causes: people can also be self-destructive without detrimental consequences for others—for instance, in trying to achieve a particular ideal body form such as being extremely thin or extremely muscular.

Be realistic!

The call to be realistic might seem to undermine my argument so far and to affirm James' complaint in the opening quotation above, but I will argue that this is not the case. Having ideals needs to be balanced with realistic expectations about one's possibilities. For, though ideals can inspire people to try to achieve things beyond their perceived capacities, unachievable excellences can also lead to lack of interest, rejection or apathy (see, for instance, Rescher, 1987, p. 16). It is therefore equally important that children learn to evaluate their capacities to gain insight into which ideals they can try to achieve. For instance, a child who does not have substantial mathematical ability will only be frustrated if she has the ideal of becoming a famous scientist; the possible loss of self-respect induced by the impossibility of achieving the ideal may be averted by the assistance of teachers in reflecting on her capacities and abilities in relation to the ideals she aspires to. If children are unable to undertake actions contributing to the realisation of the ideal, educators need to help them to find more realistic ideals.

In respect of ultimate ideals, the approach of educators should be different. Here, educators need to assist children in understanding that

they can pursue ultimate ideals but that they have to acknowledge that they will never actually realise them. Knowing that one will never actually reach the levels of perfection of ultimate aims will reduce the chance that one will be frustrated or feel guilty and give up aspiring and trying. Similarly, there are ideals that require the contribution and sometimes the co-operation of many, which are for this reason almost unattainable—for instance, the realisation of a clean and healthy global environment or of a just world. Probably most people agree that these situations are excellent but that they are not yet realised, and maybe many also believe that they should contribute to achieving this ideal. However, the ways in which people try to achieve these ideals are diverse, and some might argue that not all ways are as conducive to the realisation of the ideals as others. One's enthusiasm to contribute to the realisation of these ideals can turn to scepticism, feelings of guilt or loss of interest if one does not make the distinction between one's own contribution and the actual influence of that contribution on the realisation of the ideal.

Having a sense of realism should not be taken to imply the rejection of ideals in favour of more modest aims. Being realistic about one's possibilities in realising the ideal does not mean that one should have no ideals. However, even though one is committed to one's ideals, in trying to achieve them one will find obstacles on one's way and one will often be disappointed. Having realistic expectations about one's possibilities, maintaining one's confidence and will-power as well as being able to see what one has already achieved are necessary dispositions in the overcoming of potential disillusionment. This also affirms the importance of an authentic underwriting of the ideal. For one will only enjoy one's attempts to achieve one's aspirations and surmount one's disillusion when it is for something one deeply desires.¹⁵

Correspondence: Doret J. de Ruyter, Department of Philosophy and History of Education, Faculty of Psychology and Education, Vrije University, Van der Boechorstraat 1, 1081 BT, Amsterdam.
Email: dj.de.ruyter@psy.vu.nl

NOTES

1. See Murdoch, 1999, p. 131, for the opening quotation.
2. As an example, and with particular reference to the dominance of economic reasons, see the Secretary of State for Education's Strategy plan (DfES, 2001). This document and various statements by Tony Blair, former Minister of State for Education Estelle Morris and the current Minister Charles Clarke might well prompt cynicism about the importance that the Department for Education and Skills attaches to the ideals it espouses. For a further discussion, see the *Impact* pamphlet by Steven Bramall and John White (Bramall and White, 2000).
3. Gerald MacCallum seems to argue that such cases do indeed involve a *conceptual* mistake: 'in order for a person to be said to *have* ideals in any clear way, he must be said to have a serious interest in whether he *could* achieve that to which he claims to aspire and believe that this achievement is not utterly out of the question' (MacCallum, 1967, p. 142).

4. In discussing Aristotle's conception of the ideal life, Gavin Lawrence (1993) makes a similar distinction: namely, the 'however circumstanced' ideal, which is comparable to the ideal qualities of character, and 'the ideally circumstanced ideal'. The introduction of this distinction overcomes the seeming inconsistency in Aristotle's work between pluralistic and monistic ideals.
5. In classifying an ideal, we can make a distinction between the motive of the ideal and the ideal itself. Someone can have a moral ideal that is primarily based on his religious convictions. For instance, a Christian's moral ideal of global justice can be inspired by the New Testament.
6. See, for instance, David Carr: 'It is arguable, then, that the moral virtues are rather better construed as goals of personal aspiration inspired by some objective conception of human flourishing or of what it is to live well. In short, it is easier perhaps to understand the great motivating power that the moral virtues can have in human affairs if they are construed as representing something that a man should want to be, rather than as things he is unwillingly constrained to do' (Carr, 1991, p. 253).
7. Rescher calls this, slightly disparagingly, a mini ideal.
8. Compare R. S. Peters' conception of practical rationality (1973).
9. Siegel's argument does not exclude Rescher's theory if Rescher's idea is read as describing the state of affairs that Siegel acknowledges: that ideals are in fact developed and held in local cultures.
10. In this collection of articles Frankfurt seems to take two positions. The first is that ultimate ends that people deeply care about are similar to ideals. The second is that ideals go beyond these ultimate ends, that ideals limit the choices of ultimate ends as well. I follow the first interpretation.
11. Brezinka includes among these personality states specific capabilities such as mastering a language or being able to cook, but they can also be highly complex 'should-be states' such as being a democratic citizen or a Christian (Brezinka, 1974, p. 12).
12. For a further discussion of the importance of consistency as well as of the offering of ideal exemplars, see De Ruyter and Conroy (2002).
13. If my argument is correct, Section 18 of the Public Order Act 1986 makes it possible to penalise parents who share their racist ideals with children. This section states that if a person uses words or behaviour that are threatening, abusive, or insulting with the intent to stir up racial hatred or where such is likely to happen, this person can be imprisoned for a maximum period of two years.
14. This does not imply, of course, that all actions that children (or adults) undertake in order to achieve such non-moral ideals are also morally indifferent. The ideal of being beautiful or being an excellent athlete can be detrimental to the child's physical and psychological well-being. The ideal of being an excellent academic may lead to self-centred action at the expense of students or colleagues. Therefore, whilst educators should give children freedom to explore which non-moral ideals they wish to pursue, they should, if necessary, restrict children's freedom in the way in which they try to achieve the ideals.
15. I wish to thank the audience at the research seminar at the Institute of Education in London at which I presented an earlier version of this article for their constructive comments. I especially thank Paul Standish, Harry Brighouse, Ben Spiecker and the anonymous referees for their helpful remarks.

REFERENCES

- Aristotle (1985) *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. T. Irwin (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company).
- Baumeister, R. (1997) *Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Violence* (New York, W. H. Freeman).
- Berlin, I. (2000) *The Roots of Romanticism*, Henry Hardy (ed.) (London, Pimlico).
- Bramall, S. and White, J. (2000) *Will the new National Curriculum live up to its aims? Impact No 6* (London, Philosophy of Education Society Great Britain).
- Brezinka, W. (1974) *Grundbegriffe der Erziehungswissenschaft* (München, Ernst Reinhardt Verlag).
- Carr, D. (1991) *Educating the Virtues* (London and New York, Routledge).

- De Ruyter, D. J. (1993) *Met recht ingrijpend: Een pedagogisch criterium voor het opleggen van hulp* (*The right to intervene. A pedagogical criterion for the imposition of help*) (Amsterdam, Buijten en Schipperheijn).
- De Ruyter, D. J. and Conroy, J. C. (2002) The formation of identity: the importance of ideals, *Oxford Review of Education*, 28.4, pp. 509–522.
- De Ruyter, D. J., Conroy, J. C., Lappin, M. and McKinney, S. (forthcoming) Ideals of ITE students at Glasgow University, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 19.
- DfES (2001) Education and Skills: Delivering Results; A Strategy to 2006 online at http://www.dfes.gov.uk/delivering-results/docs/DfES_strategy_Document.doc
- Edel, A. (1945) The Evaluation of Ideals, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 42, pp. 561–577.
- Frankfurt, H. G. (1982) Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person, in: G. Watson (ed.), *Free Will* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), pp. 96–110.
- Frankfurt, H. G. (1999) *Necessity, Volition and Love* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Hare, R. M. (1963) *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Gewirth, A. (1998) *Self-fulfillment* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).
- Irwin, T. (1985) *Translation of Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company).
- Lawrence, G. (1993) Aristotle and the Ideal Life, *The Philosophical Review*, 102.1, pp. 1–34.
- MacCallum, G. C. (1967) Berlin on the Compatibility of Values, Ideals, and ‘Ends’, *Ethics*, 77.2, 139–145.
- Mill, J. S. (1969) *Autobiography*. Stillinger, J. (ed.) (Boston, Houghton Mifflin).
- Moore, W. (1948) On the Nature and Justification of Ideals, *Ethics*, 58, pp. 112–117.
- Murdoch, I. (1999) *The Bell* (London, Vintage).
- Newman, J. (1986) *Fanatics and Hypocrites* (Buffalo, Prometheus Books).
- Rescher, N. (1987) *Ethical Idealism. An inquiry into the Nature and Function of Ideals* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press).
- Peters, R. (1973) Freedom and the Development of the Free Man, in: J. F. Doyle (ed.), *Educational Judgments* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul), pp. 119–142.
- Siegel, H. (1999) Multiculturalism and the Possibility of Transcultural Educational and Philosophical Ideals, *Philosophy*, 74, pp. 387–409.
- Singer, I. (1992) *The Creation of Value. Meaning in Life*. Vol. 1 (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press).
- Taylor, C. (1992) *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press).
- Ungoed-Thomas, J. (1997) *Vision of a School: the good school in the good society* (London, Cassell).